Eastern Europe

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Islamic Institutions and Education in Imperial Russia

The study of Islamic culture in Russia, and especially in imperial Russia, is a newly emerging field in the area of Islamic studies, yet one which promises considerable dividends for illuminating both the field of Inner Asian Islam and for Islamic studies as a whole. When speaking of Islam in Russia, we have in mind a specific region of imperial Russia, namely the Volga-Ural region and western Siberia, where substantial sedentary and nomadic Turkic Muslim communities came under Russian rule at a relatively early stage, in the middle of the 16th century. In the context of Russian colonial expansion in the 19th century we can consider this region 'metropolitan Russia'.

The development of Islam, specifically Islamic intellectual and institutional life, in this region differed in several important ways from the other Muslim regions of the Russian empire, such as Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and the North Caucasus. The Volga-Ural region and Siberia were conquered by Russia in the 16th century and were populated by large settlements of Russian colonists and indigenous Finno-Ugric and Turkic non-Muslims. By the second half of the 18th century Muslims in the Volga-Ural region and Siberia had already experienced two hundred years of Russian rule, and many Muslims figured prominently among the elite of Russia's merchants and gentry. At the same time, only a small proportion of Muslim peasants were serfs, and the vast majority were either state peasants or tribute-paying tribesmen, which placed them in a more privileged position than the vast majority of Russia's non-Muslim peasantry. By the second half of the 18th century, the Volga-Ural region's Muslim communities were firmly integrated into the Russian state's systems of estates and privileges, and overall can be said to have held a generally favourable position in comparison with the empire's Christian majority. Except for localized and largely unsuccessful Christianization campaigns before the second half of the 18th century, Muslim communities in Russia were allowed to practice their faith freely, and this was especially true along the steppe frontier, where Russian officials depended upon Muslim translators, Cossacks and agents to maintain imperial authority over their nomadic co-religionists. In fact, one of the defining features of Islam in Russia from 1552 until 1917 is that the administration of Islam was firmly in the hands of the civil and military authorities, and not in the hands of the Orthodox Church.

Another defining feature of Islam in Russia proper, which separated it intellectually and institutionally from other Muslim communities in the Russian empire, was the existence of state-sponsored and funded imperial-level organizations staffed almost entirely by Muslims. These organizations were founded in the 1780s, during the reign of Empress Catherine the Great, and remained in place up to 1917, into the Soviet era, and to a degree their institutional successors survive in the Russian Federation. The most important and consequential of these organizations was the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly, founded in 1788 and headquartered in the city of Ufa. This organization administered nearly all of the Muslim communities in a vast area, encompassing the Volga-Ural region, southwestern Siberia, and at varying times, the northern Kazakh steppe. In all, by the beginning of the 20th century the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly administered approximately seven million Muslims.

While firmly integrated into the Russian state in political and economic terms, culturally the Volga-Ural Muslims in imperial Russia were for the most part isolated, or rather insulated, from Russian cultural influence. In fact, the establishment of imperial-level Islamic institutions unleashed a highly dynamic Islamic intellectual revival at the grassroots level which paralleled and was dependent upon Russia's general political and economic expansion. To be sure, this very much self-aware revival was the foundation for the emergence of Pan-Turkist, Pan-Islamist and local nationalist movements in Russia after 1905, but the Islamic revival is worthy of study in its own right as an example of the symbiotic relationship between Russian political and economic power on the one hand, and its Muslim communities on the other.

The Islamic revival in Imperial Russia

The Islamic revival that took place in imperial Russia at this time involved the establishment of a massive network of local institutions, including mosques, madrasas, *maktab*s, and Sufi lodges. Before the accession of Catherine II, these institutions existed in Russia but were very poorly developed. Equally important was the revival of Muslim intellectual life. Thousands of *maktab*s, where village children received Islamic primary education, and a network of dozens of madrasas, regional centres of higher education where imams and other Islamic scholars received training in all of the major Islamic sciences, were the institutional engine of the revival. Already by the end of the 18th century the madrasa network was well established, especially in the cities of Orenburg and Kazan, which to a large degree were the centres of Russia's Islamic revival. This network extended throughout the Islamic world, where many Volga-Ural scholars study. The most prominent destinations were Central Asia, especially Bukhara, Daghestan, and Egypt. Intellectual aspects of Russia's Islamic revival have been recently discussed in a pioneering study by the German scholar Michael Kemper, entitled *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baschkirien: der islamische Diskurs unter russicher Herrschaft, 1789-1889* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1998). In this study the term 'Islamic Discourse' has a restricted meaning. It implies the debates and discussions of social, political and religious issues expressed through traditional Islamic literary genres and institutions, such as Sufism and Sufi treatises, theology, law, and historiography.

At the foundation of Islamic revival in the Volga-Ural region and Siberia were, however, local Islamic institutions, which were overwhelmingly rural. These consisted of mosques, madrasas and *maktab*s, and were staffed by imams, *mudarris*es, and *mu'adhdhin*s. To these we can also add local Sufi networks, which were closely integrated into this institutional structure. A singular feature of these institutions, which is made obvious in the considerable institutionally focused historiography produced within these communities, is that the growth and the very existence of Islamic institutions was predicated on the institutional framework of the Orenburg Muslim Spiritual Assembly as well as upon the bureaucratic mechanisms administered by the provincial civil authorities. Such a framework not only formalized the status of these communities as Muslims vis-à-vis the empire's non-Muslim majority, but it also served to distinguish Volga-Ural, Siberian Muslims, and to a limited degree Kazakh Muslims from the empire's newly incorporated Muslims outside of Russia proper. Another important feature characterizing these institutions was that they evolved in the context of rapid empire-wide economic expansion. Specifically, the number of mosques grew at an ever increasing pace, well beyond the natural increase of the Muslim population. Within his own lifetime, an individual could witness the number of mosques, *maktab*s, and scholars multiply several times over in his own community. Momentum carried this growth through the 1917 Revolution and ensuing civil war. New mosques were being built and new Islamic scholars were being trained right up to 1929, when the Soviet authorities began closing mosques and arresting Islamic scholars in earnest.

A detailed examination of Russia's rural Muslim institutions indicates that the flourishing of institutional life was symptomatic of a very dynamic and active cultural life in rural areas. As we have noted, Michael Kemper has examined the major intellectual currents, or Islamic discourse, challenging ill-informed yet commonly encountered stereotypes depicting pre-modern Islamic intellectual life as decadent, derivative and benighted. However, these modernist-inspired depictions of Islamic life in imperial Russia, which seek to emphasize the 'modernization' and 'national' aspirations of Russia's Muslims, have tended to say very little about rural institutions as such, instead assuming that their already doubtful conclusions could simply be applied to rural areas, which they assumed without elaboration were obviously backward. Such nationalist-inspired studies have assumed that by the end of the 19th century traditional Muslim institutions were in serious crisis, unable to meet the needs of a population entering the modern (that is, European) world. These historians argue that *jadid*ist education, that is, European-style education adapted to a Muslim context, simply replaced the decaying and useless traditional modes of education in these communities. Typically these modernist depictions of 'traditional' education are not based on any empirical evidence; the superiority of modernism and European education is simply assumed and stated.

Islamic education in Novouzensk district

Research undertaken on the Islamic institutions of a single district, specifically Novouzensk district in Samara province, demonstrates that dynamic institutions, especially educational institutions, existed at the rural level essentially up to the 1917 Revolution. At the beginning of the 20th century in this district, 'traditional' educational institutions were in no way 'in crisis', but were actually expanding. Both parents and *shagird*s were closely involved in monitoring the curriculum and effective *mudarris*es were actively sought. Furthermore, the system of patronage of institutions and financial support by the community as whole involved close interaction and cooperation between the community and instructors. Local instructors and *ʿalim*s were closely integrated into the regional Islamic network and into larger networks as well.

As a result, the curriculum both in madrasas and *maktab*s was fairly uniform throughout the Volga-Ural region and enabled literate villagers to express themselves in an Islamic discourse that linked them both regionally and to the Islamic world as a whole. Thus, isolation from Russian education, which modernists cite as a failure of the traditional curriculum, was actually seen by these Muslims as desirable, not only because it distinguished them from non-Muslims, but also because it helped link them to the Islamic world. In fact, when modernist (*jadid*) schools opened in Novouzensk district during the first decade of the 20th century, they were forced to close, not out of opposition but out of apathy on the part of the villagers. Clearly they deemed modernist education to be of little value.

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